

Geographic Review Panel 4 – San Joaquin River

Proposal number: 2001-D201

Short Proposal Title: Riparian Brush Rabbit
Habitat Acquisition

1. Applicability to CALFED ERP Goals and Implementation Plan and CVPIA priorities, and relevance to ERP and CVPIA priorities for your region. This project is directly related to terrestrial endangered species habitat protection and enhancement related to the protection and enhancement of riparian habitat and their associated uplands necessary for the survival of a variety of riparian and aquatic species. Acquisition of upland habitats helps to buffer and minimize degradation of aquatic and riparian habitats and in this case, to help protect and restore, ultimately, two particularly endangered San Joaquin River watershed species. Applicable to ERP Goals and Implementation Plan, especially portions associated with the MSCS, and to CVPIA Section (b)(1) other.

2. Linkages/coordination with previously funded projects or other restoration activities in your region. The proposed habitat acquisition will have results serendipitous to related projects and restoration of ecosystem and hydrologic functions.

The project to help recover the brush rabbit and woodrat are related to the recovery of other San Joaquin Valley terrestrial species. The proposal does not indicate that it is coordinating with other Stanislaus River restoration efforts, however. Closely linked to similar efforts at Caswell Memorial State Park, which is the adjacent property. Also closely linked to ESRP and San Joaquin River NWR goals. Panel questioned how the proposed project is being coordinated with proposal C205 (SJRNWR Riparian Habitat Protection and Floodplain Restoration Project).

3. Feasibility, especially the project's ability to move forward in a timely and successful manner. A program to conduct land acquisition can be feasible if landowners are willing participants and are approached in the right manner. Land acquisitions and easements are already being successfully used throughout the San Joaquin Valley to help wetland and endangered species protection and habitat enhancement.

4. Qualifications of the applicants and others involved in implementing the proposed project. Applicants experienced in this type of acquisition and are highly qualified to plan and conduct land acquisition and conduct the initial field studies and "cleanup" described.

5. Local involvement (including environmental compliance). Aside from approaching the landowners, no specific local partnership approaches are addressed. USFWS has established outreach guidelines and public involvement guidelines for land acquisitions. Public scoping for the NEPA process for a land acquisition process for the riparian brush rabbit was recently published in the Federal Register. No specific locations are to be addressed by the process. Public concern about increased flood potential will likely arise.

Coordination with other agencies, stakeholders and others for later phases (particularly levee adjustments, meandering, etc) does not appear to be adequately addressed. Further, these also need to be coordinated with ongoing river and fish restoration efforts.

6. Cost. The estimated land costs seem very high compared to irrigated agricultural lands in other counties. Costs appear reasonable for this location.

7. Cost sharing. None for Phase I.

8. Additional comments. No doubt exists that the riparian brush rabbit and woodrat are in dire need of additional habitat, and particularly more upland areas for escape or to support small refugia populations for restoration of populations following major flood events. The brush rabbits on Alex Hildebrand's ranch were apparently extirpated by the floods of the mid 1990's.

From a geographical perspective, this project will have little perceptible direct benefit to fish in the near term, although in the long-term restoration process, a wider protected riparian corridor can only have a positive effect to minimizing damaging edge effects.

Regional Ranking

Panel Ranking: Medium high

Provide a brief explanation of your ranking: The implementation of this project is essential to help ensure the survival of the remaining brush rabbits at Caswell Memorial State Park. The value of the project relative to land acquisition practice as described in the proposal is questionable, as this is a common practice. However, there also may be positive benefits to widening the buffer zone to river riparian habitats, including maintenance of good water quality and reducing edge effect, depending upon how the lands are managed.